

2007 Farm Bill: Opportunities to Improve Low-Income Californians' Nutrition

I. Participation in Food Stamps.

Context.

The best defense to hunger and food insecurity is the Food Stamp Program; UCLA's 2003 CHIS report shows that only 17.7% of low-income adults actually experiencing hunger – the neediest of the needy – are receiving food stamps: this means that the program is not serving more than 4 out of 5 of the neediest.

This is consistent with national surveys that show California's FSP participation rate toward the bottom of states, around 50 percent. This means up to \$2.5 billion federal dollars lost every year and, worse, 2 million empty plates.

Problems:

- Complication of application and retaining benefits.
- Unfamiliarity or misconception about the program and about eligibility.
- Unfavorable cost/benefit analysis of applying.

Solutions:

Giant steps to improve participation:

- **Removing asset requirements entirely.** Go to income-based eligibility. Retirement and other categories of exemption add counterproductive complexity to application process.
- **Align and combine application for food stamps with other assistance programs.** Build on direct certification-like approach (AB 1385) so that Medi-Cal approval automatically includes FSP enrollment. (Connect two health programs.)

More modest steps to improve participation:

- USDA should build on demonstration projects by requiring states to:
 - Remove all barriers to on-line application and reporting
 - Maintain non-traditional office days and hours
 - Outstation eligibility workers
 - Decrease paper verification requirements
- Increase rewards to states for accelerating and simplifying administration and improving customer service.
- Support improvements to immigrant-specific application problems (sponsor deeming and sponsor liability provisions).

II. Food Stamps' Capacity to Fight Obesity.

Context:

1/3 of all children are overweight or at risk of overweight and 2/3 of adults are obese or overweight. Child overweight rate is growing 1 percent per year. And, most overweight children will become obese adults.

Goal:

Mobilize the federal nutrition programs, originally designed to combat hunger, to prevent obesity as well. More resources for purchasing food can mean healthier food choices.

Action Steps:

- **Increase benefit levels** to reflect an updated Thrifty Food Plan. More benefits will assist families to follow the 2005 Dietary Guidelines.
- **Increase purchases of fresh fruit and vegetables by food stamp participants** by establishing financial incentives, stretching FSP benefits for purchase of F&V by providing rebates.

III. Other Obesity Prevention Opportunities

- **Update commodity programs** reaching low-income households (Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, as well as Emergency Food Assistance Program and Commodity Supplemental Food Program) to reflect 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Commodities should stand as a model for healthy food choices and support a nutritious diet.
- **Support effective nutrition education methods** to ensure benefit purchases eventually reflect appropriate dietary patterns.